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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 006077

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2015

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SUBJECT: THE VIEW FROM PARLIAMENT: MEHLIS, THE ASAD SPEECH,
AND LABWANI

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

11. (C) Summary: In separate meetings November 15-16, three non-Ba'athist Syrian MP's sounded off about the Mehliis investigation, President Asad's November 10 speech, and the recent imprisonment of opposition figure Kamal Labwani. In their first meetings with Polchief, they hewed closely to the SARG line on these issues, questioning Mehliis' independence, highlighting the positive in Asad's speech, and rejecting the statements on Labwani as not helpful. One of the MP's, moderate Islamist Mohammed Habash, noted that the U.S. cannot succeed with its policy objectives in Syria if it tries to engage with civil society and the opposition, while ignoring the government. End Summary.

12. (C) MEHLIS SEEN AS NOT PLAYING FAIR WITH SYRIA: Regarding the UN investigation into the Hariri assassination, Lattakia MP Noumeir al-Ghanem, head of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Parliament, questioned Mehliis's independence, and, hinting at U.S. involvement, observed that many of his decisions seemed "directed" by a foreign power. PolChief countered the notion and noted that USG officials were often caught scrambling, trying to anticipate where Mehliis is heading with his investigation. Ghanem also pointed to Mehliis's refusal to negotiate an MOU with Syria and to meet even briefly with the Syrian judicial commission investigating the Hariri killing as additional signs that UNIIIC is out to humiliate Syria and force the SARG into a non-cooperative response.

13. (C) Ghanem said that he would head a small Parliamentary delegation that would travel to UNSC capitals soon and noted his interest in traveling to Washington to meet with Congressmen. (Note: Ghanem is a professor of architecture at Tishrin University, in the coastal city of Lattakia. His father played a formative role in the political mentoring of the young Hafez al-Asad.)

14. (C) Damascus MP Baha Eddin Hassan, a businessman, told Polchief the Syrian street is convinced that the regime "is innocent of the blood of Hariri." (Comment: Actually the fluid street consensus that developed after Asad's speech leaned more to the view that Mehliis had not proven any involvement by Syrian officials and should not be allowed to humiliate Syria.)

15. (C) THE ASAD SPEECH: These representatives spoke in generally positive terms about Asad's November 10 speech. Hassan said the speech had helped ease the concerns of people and give them renewed hope, after a month-long period when Syria had been subjected to intense international pressure and criticisms. Like Hassan and others, Ghanem acknowledged that parts of the speech "were rough," especially the President's remarks on Lebanon and PM Siniora. In attempting to explain some of the harshness, Ghanem said there is a sense in Syria that the Lebanese "are egging on Mehliis." Both men said that Siniora had not kept commitments he had made to Asad.

16. (C) WHY NO RESPONSE FROM U.S. ON IRAQ SIGNALS: Ghanem also noted that Asad had made clear in the speech that he was ready to cooperate with the U.S. on Iraq and other issues and asked PolChief why the U.S. continually refuses to open a channel to explore how a deal could be worked out. Liberal Islamist MP Dr. Mohammed Habash said that increasing U.S. pressure, creating the perception that the U.S. wants regime change, had allowed Asad in his speech to forge a strong bond between the regime and the Syrian people. (Comment: Until Asad's speech, a street consensus had been emerging that Syrians should not have to pay for the mistakes of a handful of senior regime officials. That view has not disappeared, but has been stifled by Asad's emotional appeal to Syrians' strong feelings about national pride and dignity.)

17. (C) BRISTLING AT LABWANI: Hassan bristled at the recent USG statements in support of opposition figure Kamal Labwani, which he described as indicative of a "grudge against Syria." Hassan attempted to dismiss Labwani as "completely unknown" in Syria and questioned why the U.S. attempted to make "major figures" out of people like Labwani and Farid al-Ghadry. Habash also maintained that the USG statements on Labwani were not helpful. Echoing the sentiments of many Syrians

(and a view that SARG has successfully propagated), Habash claimed that Labwani "crossed a red line" when he decided to meet with senior USG officials at a time when Syria was being subjected to intense U.S. pressure and hostility. That decision had allowed the SARG to portray Labwani as "a collaborator" and to undercut his credibility. (Note: Habash is known as the most prominent liberal Muslim cleric in Syria. He heads an Islamic Studies Center and clearly has quiet regime endorsement of his views. His observations on Islam and fundamentalism in Syria are reported septel.)

18. (C) More broadly, Habash noted that the U.S. cannot succeed with its policy objectives in Syria, especially in the area of democratization and strengthening civil society and respect for human rights, if it tries to engage with political reformers and the opposition, while ignoring the government. Like many moderate reform-minded figures in Syria, Habash says it is essential to support the reform efforts of President Asad. Proceeding without SARG engagement will not be productive for civil society or for the U.S., he added. On a separate note, Habash pointed out that while the USG was pushing for passage of UNSCR 1636 and insisting on full Syrian compliance, Israeli PM Sharon issued a statement saying that "he would ignore UN resolutions on the Golan Heights and would build new settlements there." Finally, Habash expressed support for the Damascus Declaration and regret that the SARG had not responded more positively to the initiative.

19. (C) Comment: All three of these MP's, while listed as Independents rather than Ba'athists, are government supporters to one degree or another. Habash and Ghanem offered more nuanced views that betray private reservations about the limited scope and pace of political and economic reform in Syria. Habash is a provocative and independent thinker in his chosen field of Islamic theology. However, most of the handful of independent political figures who were in Parliament are now in prison or chose not to run for re-election to a body they felt the government was using as a sham to cover the lack of real democratic development in Syria.

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